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## THE TENDENCIES OF ENGLISH FICTION.

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IT has long been a fixed idea of the English nation that its schools of fiction are superior to those of any other country. It has long been the habit of its critics complacently to compare its productions with those of every other nation, to the contempt and disadvantage of the latter. It has been a matter of pride and of prejudice both; and it has never occurred to the insular mind that there could possibly be two sides to the question. This strong self-esteem was born in the days of Smollett and Goldsmith, and grew steadily through those of Scott onward to those of Bulwer, Thackeray, and Dickens; such self-esteem seems justified by the strength and beauty of these masters, and was, on the whole, accepted and ratified by the voice of the reading world. English novelists during that century of fine work occupied a high place in the annals of the best literature; and if the Puritanism of their nation still restrained the frank expression of their views, and deference to its hypocrisies still prevented their portraits of human nature from being as accurate as they might have been, still they attained a standard of excellence in fiction which no other writers, so numerous or so manly, have ever reached before them. In their hands the novel assumed the place of playfellow, teacher, and companion all in one; it reached those numbers of readers to whom verse was unintelligible; it touched social and political problems, if superficially, yet in a manner which induced thought in the thoughtless; and it brought some knowledge of culture, some sympathy with pain, some insight into higher natures, to large classes of persons who could have been reached by no other means. The novelist, in a great measure, dethroned the dramatist, and was accepted by those who would have refused to listen to the poet. It was then that English fiction, in the eyes of Englishmen, and without much dispute from the voices of

other nations, assumed the lofty place in art which it imagines that it has with ease retained.

I say "imagines," because I consider that it has not so retained it in fact. I think that so much water has been mingled with the wine of English literature that it has altogether lost the body and flavor which it had of old, and its extraordinary prolixity and puerility are among the many unmistakable signs of the decay of English intellectual power. Redundant and mediocre literature is almost always the accompaniment, perhaps the offspring, of national decadence, and there was never any time in which English literature was so enormous in quantity and so contemptible in quality as it is at the present epoch. To open almost any English volume or periodical is to blush for the mental status alike of the writer who writes and of the public which reads. There is an endless outpouring from the printing-presses of second-rate, feeble, and verbose fiction, which is accompanied by a stream of so-called criticism as verbose, feeble, and second-rate as itself; and in this vast invertebrate, jelly-like mass the reader searches in vain for any knowledge of human nature, any trace of scholarship, any presence of original thought, any evidence that the producers have any consciousness of style, and of the study of style, of the world as it exists, and of the requirements of art. Fiction has come to be regarded in England as among the professions or trades, by which any person possessed of an average education and intelligence can earn his bread. Novelists are not ashamed to advocate the adoption of "the literary calling" as a resource to be seriously considered by those who cannot find clerkships at home, and are unwilling to take farms in the colonies. Rules for their assistance are generously given, and guilds are formed for the more rapid and profitable production of their works. Fiction is no more a daughter of the Muses and the Graces, but a mere slave of the lamp and the quill. The art which, of all others, most demands the play of fancy, the repose of leisure, and the gifts of imagination, is supposed to be one of the trades which every one who can learn to turn a hand-organ can succeed in following with profit; and the quill-driving of the lawyer's clerk, as of the bill-discounter, is forsaken by its votaries for what is deemed the lighter quill-driving of novel writing, and, not content with thus debasing art themselves, they beat their drum triumphantly, and invite all mediocrity to come and do the like.

What is the result ? That Fiction, in lieu of being the daughter of Wit and Fancy, and the sister of the poets, is only the vulgar handmaid of a chop-house, and the mistress of a man who calls her to pay his daily luncheon. It is supposed that anybody can write a novel ; that it is one of those things which any one can do with a little practice, as any one who has the proper number of limbs, and is not too old, can learn to play lawn tennis, or sit upon a bicycle ; and year upon year these thousands of novels crowd the shelves of libraries, and the book boxes of library subscribers, with no gleam of wit, no grain of thought, no trace of culture in these tons of spoiled paper and their millions of useless printed words. It may be said that there is always a mass of rubbish in every national literature ; that there is always, and in all arts, the poetaster and the poet, the dauber and the artist, the figure-cutter and the sculptor, Grub Street and Parnassus. But what is new and unspeakably hideous in this matter is, that the scribblers are being gravely exhorted to scribble as a career of honor ; that to live in Grub Street is being deemed most honorable ; that the stone figure chopped without art is being held quite as good as the Elgin marbles ; that the "pot-boiler," crudely daubed to get twenty pounds, is clamorously elected to be worthy to hang beside the "Audience of Agrippa" or the "Law and Death." Mediocrity has at all times spawned and swarmed with odious prolificness. That we know. What is new, and most ominous, is, that in English fiction, and to a lesser degree in all other English arts, mediocrity, even ineptitude, is allowed to take its stand unrebuked, and instantly proclaim itself the equal of all it meets.

The manner in which the art of fiction has come of late to be regarded cannot be better and more painfully illustrated than by the story which goes at this moment through the newspapers of the late "Hugh Conway," a stock-broker of the real name of Fargus, who late in life, finding he could write a sensational story with success, sold his business, and determined to "live by literature." This manner of looking at the creation of romances as a trade, possibly as profitable as brokerage and stock-jobbing, is comical ; what is more comical is, that this fact is reported quite respectfully and sympathetically by the press in general ; whilst in this person's own town of Bristol a scholarship of literature is to be founded in his memory. A scholarship of literature—God

save the mark!—to record the fact that a man once deserted a broker's office to write two or three stories of wholly impossible incidents, in a style the most injurious to "literature" that could be imagined! This evidence, unimportant in itself, is only worthy of notice as an illustration of the low standard of fiction in England, and the representation of it by a mass of men essentially *bourgeois* in their position and their opinions, without any censure from the public at large, or any general perception of the degradation to art. A great writer may be very poor; great writers not seldom; but no great writer ever yet looked on his art as a trade whereby he would pay his tailor and buy his shirts.

The impression that fiction is a trade for which other trades may be, in cold blood and in deliberate speculation, profitably exchanged is yearly growing stronger and stronger, and the result of it is to flood the English libraries with novels manufactured as mechanically and as ignobly as any piece of cotton goods vamped up in a Manchester factory to cheat Hindoo purchasers. There is a kind of talent in some of these of the imitative and commonplace order; in many there is not even as much as this. Any competent judge taking up, for instance, any number of any one of these periodicals elevated in England to what is called "light literature" will, if he knew what literature should be, be appalled at the absolute rubbish which passes under that name. In France no one writes unless he have something to say, and unless he have at least mastered the elements of the requirements of style; but in England the latter is set absolutely at defiance, whilst the most trivial and imbecile incidents are deemed worthy of filling pages on pages of print.

Many causes have combined to produce this decay in fiction as in other forms of literature: the circulating libraries, which induce hasty and undigested reading of as many volumes as it is possible to obtain in a short space of time; the absurd practice of three-volume form of novel publication, which tempts writers to spin out a thin thread of interest into nothingness; the absolute ignorance of publishers, who think that fiction may be woven by the hour and sold by the yard; the utter inefficiency of criticism, which drags into a momentary distinction work that should never even have found a printer; all these and similar reasons have concurred to bring about the present state of English imaginative literature. I am myself strongly opposed to what is

called the serial form of issue, because I believe it to be injurious alike to the writer and the reader, and to be a most inartistic, grotesque, and unworthy fashion of bringing any work before the public. But serial publication has long prevailed in France, and has not prevented French fiction from retaining its force, its artistic method of construction, and its excellences of style; therefore this cannot be reckoned amongst the malign influences which have brought English novelists to the low place which they now occupy, and the main reason must still be sought elsewhere. I would myself attribute it chiefly to two causes: one, the Puritanism which so strangely lingers in the national character; the other, the extreme ignorance of the world displayed by English story-tellers, and their insular and conventional views of life. Added to these there is also the inability of the English public to appreciate, and so to exact, art and style from those who write for it. There is an idea amongst English persons that "anything will do" to make a story, and the result is that whereas a French novel, however much you may dislike it, yet will always be a work planned with skill, and carried out with due regard to proportion. The English novel, however much you may like it, will always strike you, if you have any critical faculty at all, as slipshod, ill-arranged, not thought out before it is written, and generally inharmonious: in a word, taking that position in literature which the slattern takes amongst womankind. The slattern may be as good-looking as she will—the disorder of her clothes will always disfigure her. Most English stories start exceedingly well; the earlier portions are usually interesting, and even admirable, but they almost invariably display inability to sustain consistency and interest; the characters are not developed, are sometimes even wholly lost sight of, or have their whole idiosyncrasy altered to suit the momentary exigencies of some situation; the motives are usually feeble, and inadequate to sustain the action built on them; and the whole narrative resembles in its conformation that interesting denizen of our ponds, the tadpole, with his overwhelming head and his almost invisible body. And this defect—so grave a defect in art—is to be found not only in the feeblest but in the strongest English novels, and is at the root of their failure to content the demands of art. The hypocrisy, also, which so largely tinges all the national life, has much to answer for in the injury which it has done to English fiction as well as to English verse—

the poets have at times burst the bonds of it, the novelists have never done so. There is a tacit arrangement on the part of the nation to regard itself as chaste and immaculate in a wholesale manner which is very curious, and has never had any parallel in any other nation. The favorite English illusion is that the English people are without senses or passions, and as no art can exist without recognition of both senses and passions, the effect on English literature is fatal. Natural love, unblessed by the priest, or at least by the registry-office, must never be written up; so that the story-teller is grotesquely fettered at starting, and his obligation to obey this canon of English ethics leads to grotesque results. To illustrate my meaning I will take a novel now in course of publication in "MacMillan's Illustrated Magazine." This story turns on the fact of a young woman causing to be brought, as a lost child, to the house of her relatives, a boy who is in reality her own son, so that, without acknowledging his birth, she may be near him, and be able to rear him. Now, given this situation, the only thing which could possibly make such a one natural would be the fact that the child was the offspring of some amour of which she could not bring herself to speak, and the discovery of which would involve on her the disgrace socially attached to such circumstances. But no! With the dread which the unwritten law of the English public inspires heavy upon him, the hapless and timid author is compelled to make the child the offspring of a private marriage to an artist or drawing-master! The young woman is represented as rich, independent, masterful in character, and blessed with an indulgent father and two excellent uncles; yet, instead of declaring to them in confidence the fact of her marriage—a simple and natural step, which would have been taken by any one not out of their senses—she weaves the most elaborate plot, draws upon herself the darkest of suspicions, allows a man she loves to think anything hideous of her that he chooses, and selects as her only *confidante* an unknown woman who sells sausages in a pork-shop. This is an example *sui generis* of English fiction; an admirable situation is ruined and made ridiculous because a child born out of wedlock is inadmissible in it, and everybody must be married that the English public is to be invited to read about; such slight things as probability, possibility, harmony, and artistic requirements are all thrown aside, because before the English

public reads of the adventures of this child it must be satisfied as to the marriage certificate of its parents. It is the same peculiar form of national hypocrisy which makes bigamous unions legitimate—even popular—as a source of dramatic interest upon the stage, but adultery forbidden by the Lord Chamberlain. It is all traceable to the leaven of the puritanic element in the English character, which makes a certain amount of cant absolutely necessary to the security of its suffrages. Such cant as George Eliot and George Lewes admirably understood, so that, by a due attention to its conciliation, they together contrived to pass off on the English nation a situation, quite commonly and vulgarly illegitimate in itself, as legitimate, and even beautiful. This irresistible evidence of cant greatly hurt their talent, and makes them slightly absurd for all time ; but as a means to an end—that end pecuniary gain and social success—it was the very truest wisdom, and proved that they had read the characters of their countrypeople with a perfect accuracy.

To art, as art, however, this obligation of cant must always be deforming and injurious in a pitiable degree ; it restricts all free and natural utterance, and lies like a stone on the spontaneous growth of genius. There is no word in the English language which exactly describes the tone and manner of looking at events which is comprised in the French word *bourgeois* ; yet, not having the word, the English nation, and the fiction which is written for it, has the thing in its uttermost completeness—it is beyond everything else *bourgeois*. It has a dull, narrow, commonplace standard for everything, and the novelists have lowered themselves to this standard. The English novels of the last twenty years, especially of the last ten, are in every respect *bourgeois* novels ; are *bourgeois* in their style, their descriptions, their characters, and their views of life. Whether the story be more or less romantic or dramatic does not make any difference in this fact—the treatment of it is always *bourgeois*. This is never seen more greatly than in the amatory passages. The lovers of the English novel are always haunted by the vision of the church-steeple or the registry-office. They paddle about in shallow waters of flirtation with the church always in view, and the heights of passion they never reach. Whether it be from absolute inability or from constitutional timidity that the English novelist becomes ridiculous in his love passages, the fact is that he does become so. He has the air of



writing of something of which he knows nothing. He is evidently afraid that the family circle is looking through the key-hole at his lovers. Their passions are invertebrate, and their girls and boys may all go and hang themselves for what anybody cares. It is not because a story is simple that it is necessarily insipid. "L'Abbé Constantine" proves the contrary, cast on the simplest lines, and deriving no assistance or interest whatever from any passion, yet vivacious, charming, and graceful. Think of the charm of "Dasia;" of the delicious wit and drollery of "M. Drommel," that most inimitable of all things which the mind of Victor Cherbuliez has given us; think of "Un Grand Mariage" and of "Un Mariage d'Amour;" think of Daudet's short stories, and then realize all that a French writer can get of knowledge of the world, of wit, and of suggested wit, within the limits of a cabinet picture. And why? Because he brings a perfect artistic feeling to his works, and because he is not cumbered with the recollection of Mrs. Grundy. It is only in the conditions of an absolute freedom that any real art can be done. For the slightest French story there is always an aroma of wit, a sense of power purposely restrained, a feeling that the writer knows and implies a great deal more of human foibles than he cares for the moment to display. In a word, the French writer writes like a man or woman of the world for men and women of the world. The English writer is in many cases too ignorant and in others too timid to do this, even if he possessed the artistic power. There is always in the English writer a feeling that love is born of the devil the moment that it is betokened by anything more than the "spooning" of a boy and girl on a yacht-deck or a tennis-ground. The imbecile English boast that their novels may all be read by school-girls indicates at once the intellectual and psychological level on which they are composed. They are quite "pure;" but as human nature is not "pure" in this sense, and never will be, of what use are they then as pictures of human nature? If they represent anything, they represent middle-class manners, men's habits and characters, with a singular unanimity. If they are like anything, they are like the inner life of the rectory, the doctor's house, the lawyer's family, the merchant's suburban villa. They never get beyond the limbo of *bourgeois* sentiment. *Bourgeois* feeling tinges the whole of English fiction as jaundice tinges the human body; its politics are for the most part a mild radicalism, and its ethics are those of a

moderate evangelical preacher ; it reflects a certain humanitarianism, a very courteous leaning toward such socialism as places Dumas at the best end. But of every attempt to represent the various phases of English society, the languor and excitability, the haste and *ennui*, the mutable passions and the sated appetites, the wit and the weariness of it all, there is not a trace in the English novels of the last decade ; there is not a sign that any one of them ever saw the inside of a great London *salon* or of a great English country-house. I do not say that they have never done so ; I only say that they entirely fail to represent society if they do know it. There is more suggestion of English society, as it is, in Mr. Mallock's "New Republic," which is not a novel, than in all the English novels of his time.

In English fiction there is the most singular absence of social knowledge ; the life of society is almost entirely unrepresented in it, and the world at large is unknown. As some pictures of landscape are composed in London studios without any breath of fresh air ever blowing on their canvas, so these novels seem to be written in London chambers without any larger atmosphere or wider outlook being sought than that which the dusty window-pane affords. Again, there are novels which do picture landscape with the true colors of the country in them, but these, though their gray seas and their green cornfields are true enough to nature, altogether fail in representing the life of men and women as they are. Disraeli's novels were unhappily spoiled by an ornate diction and a sentimentality which become ridiculous ; but if these be set aside, his novels reflect the world he lived in, and show the characteristics of society as no novels have done since them. The life described in them is the life of the great world, and the multiplicity of the many different characters in them represents that infinite variety of characters which is to be found in the world. Their wit and epigram have never been appreciated in England any more than their genuine verisimilitude has been understood. If Disraeli had been born in France, and written in French, he would have ranked with Beaumarchais and Rochefoucauld. The English language, which he never knew thoroughly, allowed him bombast and hyperbole, which have obscured the fine qualities of his wit and wisdom ; yet there is no novel in any language which has more of these two things than has "Conningsby."

I do not attempt or desire to approach any criticism herein of

either dead or living novelists of England ; I only refer to the novels of Disraeli because they contain some of the very elements which, in the fiction of the present day in England, are so lamentably conspicuous by their absence ; and it seems to me the very strangest thing, that in English life, where so many clever men are in hourly contact with the social and political aspects of their life, not one of these men even has the talent to represent these aspects of it in fiction, but all of them abandon fiction to the mere *littérateur*, who only knows political life from the reporters' gallery, or the columns of the cheap press, and only knows society from its external appearance as it goes by him in Rotten Row. This society is, I say, unrepresented in the fiction of the time.

Yet what is fiction if not a photograph ? True, there is the historical novel, the romantic novel, the classical novel, which do not deal with society ; but these are rare, and will grow rarer, because the whole tendency of modern thought is to mirror and analyze and morbidly dwell upon its own self, and has less and less patience with those who ask it to exert pure imagination or to look backward at vanished ages. And the novel which represents most clearly the temperaments, opinions, and manners of society, is that which society now asks for, and which alone can have any chance of obtaining influence over it, of possessing for it that power of suggestion and of sarcasm, which the novels of an earlier time possessed for the generation of their time. And this the English fiction of the present moment cannot do, because it is too ignorant, too puerile, too timid, and too passionless. Moreover, it lacks culture, and does not even take the trouble to study the laws of its own being. The art which rules the creation of a good novel is as delicate and as severe in its execution of harmony as that which produces good music ; but English novelists do not recognize this ; fiction is to them a monotonous theme, to be played with mechanical expression on the keys of a piano-forte : of the passion-music of the great orchestras they have studied nothing.

The unimaginative and plodding character of their wit may be seen in the word "Work," which they are so fond of giving to it. No artist who was an artist *toto corde* ever used the word "work" in reference to his creations. It is one wholly incongruous and unworthy. The art which is alone well done is that which is spontaneous, delightful to the doer of it, irresistible in its empire over him, and the offspring of leisure and of fancy. I do not believe

that any trace of inspiration was ever felt by those who turned to any art in middle age, or in the midst of other occupations and pre-occupations. From Giotto to Leighton the painter has always been drawing natural objects of his own existence from the earliest years of his childhood, and I am certain that every great writer has not been less guided by the Muses in his childhood than Tennyson, who wrote verse at four years old. This is the only good and true outcome of the mind—this which is born with the man or woman as surely as the color of the eyes, which is imperious in its dominion over, and engrained in the life which it dominates. All creative art which is executed as “work” is contemptible, even in a manner blasphemous, and whatever art is pursued as mere work soon becomes scamped work.

The mere association, as convertible terms, of work and imagination is ridiculous. The moment that a writer sits down to his bureau as punctually as a clerk to his desk he becomes a mere clerk, and the kind of literature he produces can only be monotonous and insipid, created as the child cuts out perforated wood with his little saw, according to directions, and calls it carving.

All the complex, cosmopolitan, contradictory, and entirely interesting characteristics of English society remain absolutely unrepresented in English fiction. There is in it a great deal of dissonance, a great deal of discontent, much that is utterly vapid, with much that is touching, and even brilliant; its women are in themselves a study for a La Bruyère or a Juvenal, and in its inordinate extravagance, its demand for novelty, and its indifference to truth, may be read the signs of that great national decay which at the present hour makes the country lie apathetic and acquiescent under its own dishonor. There has never been any moment in history in which England has been so discredited, so disgraced, and so ridiculed by the whole world; yet there never was a moment in which it was so passive and so smugly content with its own degradation. Weak and vituperative language take the place of manly and courageous action, and a war of words is considered enough to replace the civility, the power, and the dignity which the nation has lost, losing with it the esteem and the trust of mankind. This feebleness in the national character and national intelligence may serve to account for the similar feebleness of its intellectual productions. Why has it been always impossible to produce in England such a periodical as the “*Revue des Deux Mondes*?” Because the

style of English writers is so inferior, and because the public does not require anything better than the second-rate work which they offer to it. The English public, as a rule, does not read ; it skims a little, that is all. Setting aside certain æsthetic cliques, one may say that England does not read in any scholarly sense of the word. Innumerable book-boxes enter English houses, it is true ; but the contents of them are as jumbled up in the minds of the household as the divers volumes are in the box. Except bibliophiles who frequent sales and buy rare books, nobody in England ever buys a book if he can borrow it. I think the method of English publication is partly to blame for this. If novels were produced as they are in France, people in England would possibly buy them. The English publishers waste a mountain of money in producing the three-volume editions of novels, which are only purchased by the circulating libraries, and then degrade a novel, and disgust every person of taste, by bringing that same novel out with hideous colored-paper covers, and flaunting colors, to attract the mobs in railway stations. One simple, plain, and well-printed edition issued from first to last would be made more satisfactory to the common-sense of readers and to the dignity of literature, and would save an immense quantity of money at the present time thrown away in the setting-up of the various type of the many different editions. This same course has been repeatedly advocated by many writers, and I have reason to know that the librarians would not oppose it ; but, meanwhile, the publishers think that they see a greater profit accruing to themselves from the present idiotic system of thirty-shilling, five-shilling, and two-shilling editions ; and the long-established practice continues to prevail, its idiocy sanctioned by custom. An intellectual nation would not allow its literature to be injured thus, merely to gratify the (supposed) interests of the publishing trade. But England is indifferent ; books seem very small things to it ; and the temper, gradually growing more and more apathetic, which kneels to Russia and bows to France, is not likely to exert in behalf of scholars the force which it will not put out to preserve its prestige and its possessions in Africa and in Asia. The decline of English literature keeps pace, step by step, with the decline of English political greatness. Mediocrity is accepted in its writers as in its soldiers, and verbiage without meaning is admired in its authors as in its politicians.

It is an evil which grows with every year, and it is one to which the very low standard of criticism which prevails in England panders in a most unfortunate degree. Mr. Puff is always assuring Grub Street that it is Parnassus ; and the chop-house that it is a temple. The style and quality of English fiction every year sinks lower in proportion as its issue increases in quantity ; and it is hard to see what corrective will alter this lamentable decadence, unless the English public, which in a few instances has shown itself of an independent judgment, and of a critical faculty superior to those of the professional critics, will raise its own standard of intellectual taste, and cease to accept the mere makers of books as writers of true fiction.

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